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Jail tax should be hiked, but keep sunset at 2012

BY STAFF



On Sept. 12, voters will be asked to approve an increase to the sales tax earmarked for the Coconino County Jail

District from 0.3 cents to 0.5 cents. The district will also ask voters to extend the jail tax until 2027, 15 years from the original sunset date of 2012.

It would behoove local residents to approve the jail tax increase. The tax helps to keep our jails in adequate condition. Whenever our local police arrest suspected criminals, they have to be put somewhere. Chances are, they've committed a dangerous and/or violent crime and need to be kept away from society until we figure out what kind of sentence they should receive.

For the minor cases, we have a 50-bed facility here in Page. This is a good thing to have locally, since we are approximately two hours away from Flagstaff. The less-violent cases can be held here for up to three days until a bond is posted. That is helpful for the alleged criminals, because they don't have to worry about finding a way back up to Page after being released.

If this tax increase does not pass, we stand the very real possibility of losing our local holding facility. The tax increase will help to keep the jail district solvent for years down the road. If the tax stays the same, there will be a \$1 million hole this year in the jail expenses that will need to be filled through the county's general fund. That number is expected to increase to \$3 million next year, and it won't be long before the county board of supervisors decides it's time to plug this leaking dike. That means the smaller facility, Page's, will be the first to be closed.

Approximately \$1 million per year goes into the upkeep and related expenses for the Page Jail. All told, the county spends \$1.5 million annually on Page's bad



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element, including the local cases that are brought to the Flagstaff facility. Unlike the park tax, where no money goes to local parks, some of the jail money is used for Page's benefit. It would be easy for the supervisors to cut out that small expense in order to balance its budget. We shouldn't let that happen, though.

If we're forced to transfer all of our prisoners to Flagstaff, that will mean additional expenses for the Page Police Department. With gas dancing around \$3 per gallon, transportation costs will skyrocket for Page. It will likely take one tank of gas per trip, with a 130-mile trek each way. That expense won't be paid by the county; it'll be the Page citizens who foot the bill.

Additionally, the increase in the tax would go to provide an in-house substance abuse treatment program. A majority of the criminals in the county jails are addicted to one substance or another. If a program will reduce the number of repeat offenders, ergo reduce the expenses of the jail district and provide additional bed space to be rented out, so much the better.

There are other alternatives to the sales tax, including (gasp!) an increase in property taxes, but the sales tax is the most ideal because it is not just those in the county who contribute to it. While the sales tax is getting quite high, thanks to a combination of state, county and city entitlements, isn't it worth paying a little more at the grocery store, knowing that the money is going toward keeping menaces to society locked away?

It is dubious, however, whether the tax should be kept in place for 20 years without any accountability to the voters. The jail district has demonstrated its accountability by inviting voters to view the facilities, as well as holding information sessions throughout this community and other places in the county. However, we wonder if it would be more prudent to keep the county accountable on a more frequent basis.

The current tax sunsets in 2012. That is almost six years away, a fair amount of time to let the jail district do its thing before we ask it to justify itself again. The current administration is showing itself to be very accountable, but administrations can change, depending on the will of the voters. All it would take is getting a sheriff into office that isn't fiscally accountable, and people would start wondering if it was such a good idea to leave the jail tax in place that long. We agree with the board of supervisors that there should be a sunset on the tax, but 20 years is too long to keep the tax in place unchecked.

The Coconino County Sheriff's Office has proven it can be trusted with taxpayer dollars when it comes to keeping county residents safe. The tax increase should definitely proceed. However, the extension of the tax until 2027 should be voted down.

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